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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: BUHARI ON INTER-COMMUNAL VIOLENCE, THE
ECONOMY AND FOREIGN POLICY

CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR HOWARD F. JETER; REASONS 1.5 (B)
AND (D).

1. (C) SUMMARY: During a lengthy January 30 meeting with the Ambassador, ANPP Presidential candidate Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Muhammadu Buhari shared his plans for winning the April election and elaborated on the reported rapprochement between him and former military ruler Ibrahim Babangida. Buhari gave his views on communal conflict, the economy, Nigeria's role in West Africa, and the country's relationship with the U.S. Despite Christian antipathy toward Buhari, the Northern Muslim Presidential hopeful thought former Senate President Chuba Okadigbo's presence on his ticket would begin to attract support in the predominantly Christian South. While Buhari questioned the wisdom of Nigerian peacekeeping deployments when government finances are in disarray, he acknowledged that regional stability was of paramount importance. Nigeria under Buhari therefore could be counted on to help maintain peace and security in the sub-region. The Ambassador emphasized Nigeria's importance to African stability and prosperity. He also assured Buhari of the USG's commitment to work with any democratically elected government. Sule Y. Hamma, the National Coordinator for the Buhari campaign, also attended the meeting. END SUMMARY.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

2. (C) During a 90 minute meeting with Ambassador Jeter on January 30, Buhari said he would win the election by "working from the ground up" in every state to engage the ordinary Nigerian. When asked about the Christian-dominated South, Buhari said his Vice Presidential candidate, former Senate President Chuba Okadigbo, a Christian from the Southeast, would be the "key" to his victory. While he recognized that religion worked against him in the South, Buhari thought this difficulty could be surmounted.

3. (C) When Ambassador brought up the reported mid-January rapprochement between Buhari and Babangida, Buhari became palpably agitated. Buhari said he met Babangida in Sokoto where the traditional leader of all Nigerian Muslims, the Sultan of Sokoto, encouraged the two men to make amends. Though the two supposedly parted on good terms, Buhari still seemed miffed. Since Babangida had wronged him (the 1985 coup and Buhari's nearly four-year incarceration), Buhari felt it was incumbent on Babangida to be contrite. Nonetheless and despite their troubled history, Buhari expected IBB's public support. Buhari said, however, he did not expect his former rival to help finance his campaign, although he would be grateful if he did.

COMMUNAL CONFLICT AND THE POLITICIZATION OF RELIGION

4. (C) Buhari castigated President Obasanjo's handling of communal violence. Buhari said none of the recent outbreaks in Jos and Kaduna was large enough to warrant military intervention. The retired general gave three levels of police engagement before the government should consider using the army. First, riot police, armed only with batons, should be called to disperse crowds and keep the peace. If ineffective, police with firearms should be called. If neither prove effective in quelling violence, then Mobile Police (MOPOL), with their superior training and firepower, should be deployed. Only after ratcheting

up civilian police deployment should the military be summoned. Citing the 2001 massacres in Benue, Buhari criticized Obasanjo for being too quick to "use the sledgehammer" of the military. Buhari said Nigeria needed an organized approach to containing communal violence and conflict.

15. (C) Noting that communal strife is sometimes based in religious conflicts and expressing USG concerns over the politicization of religion, Ambassador asked Buhari about a statement attributed to him in which he called on Muslims to vote only for Muslims. Showing agitation again, Buhari called the attribution a misrepresentation then provided his version of what happened. Attending a book launch in Sokoto last April, Buhari told the audience that before the advent of British colonialism, Shari'a was the law of the North. Even during British rule, Shari'a remained part of the North's legal fabric. Speaking in Hausa, Buhari told his Sokoto audience that under Shari'a, their area had been stable and peaceful. Now that Shari'a had found its way back into the Nigerian legal system, he implored Nigerians to vote for candidates who would uphold their traditional values. Buhari said a reporter, for "This Day", who neither spoke Hausa nor was present, misquoted him in an article published in "This Day" on the book launch. According to Buhari, when the reporter was subsequently asked why he said Buhari called on Muslims to vote only for Muslims the reporter replied the statement was what "he thought (Buhari) meant."

16. (C) Buhari said he had no interest in politicizing religion and that he wanted to avoid election-related violence. He was interested in signing an electoral Code of Conduct and he liked the idea of publicly condemning political violence in a joint statement with the other parties. Buhari thought the Independent Election Commission (INEC) should coordinate such a statement. (NOTE: In a published statement a week later, Buhari called on his supporters to eschew violence in the election campaigns. END NOTE.)

BLAME OBASANJO FOR FOUNDERING ECONOMY

17. (C) Turning to the economy, Buhari condemned Obasanjo's lack of leadership. "Despite receiving more revenue than any previous government, (Obasanjo) has failed," Buhari argued. Buhari cited government waste and corruption as primary causes of Nigeria's economic woes. Expressing disgust with the Obasanjo Administration, Buhari said "We don't need 25 Ministers and 60 Advisers with 5-10 cars each. We are too wasteful." He then wondered how Obasanjo could justify such expenses when the GON "cannot afford to pay soldiers and police."

18. (C) Buhari said his Administration would immediately reform the GON. Ambassador noted that 80% of the GON's budget in 2002 went to civil service salaries and maintaining the government. Sule Hama responded by saying a Buhari government would monetize many of the entitlements going to senior civil servants. For example, instead of providing cars and drivers or residences and household staff for senior officials, the GON would increase their salaries. This would reduce administrative costs by reducing the number of GON employees and allowing the GON to function more cost efficiently.

19. (C) Buhari said reforming the petroleum industry was also high on his list of priorities. He pointed to massive inefficiencies under the current government and questioned why refineries were idle and in disrepair. He wondered aloud whether official corruption had a hand in this, asking if "Abacha was once blamed for this, who is responsible now?" Buhari also questioned the slow development of Nigeria's natural gas fields, noting that Nigeria has no more trains today than it did in 1984. (COMMENT: This, obviously, is not true. END COMMENT.)

110. (C) On a more positive note, Buhari thought Nigeria and the Gulf of Guinea region could provide the United States with a more reliable supply of petroleum than the Persian Gulf States. In recognition of this potential, he hoped U.S. companies would share in the costs of increasing Nigeria's production capacity.

GIVE US DEBT RELIEF BUT NO IMF

11. (C) Asked how he would handle Nigeria's debt and issues of economic reform, Buhari again maligned the Obasanjo Administration's performance. The President had been completely ineffective in gaining relief for Nigeria's foreign debt, he declared. Buhari said Obasanjo had forgotten the lessons of his term as military Head of State and was, once again, leading Nigeria down the road to greater debt and insolvency.

12. (C) Calling on the international community to help Nigeria with its debt, Buhari said, "Unless creditor states help us, we cannot develop." The Ambassador noted the USG holds less than USD 1 billion of Nigeria's USD 30 billion debt. Because of its small portfolio, USG leverage on other creditors was correspondingly slight. Moreover, the USG and more significant creditors would not take up Nigeria's cause until Nigeria clearly enacted reform. If Nigeria hoped to get relief, it would have to make visible reforms enhancing transparency, tackling corruption and increasing accountability. The GON would have to renew its formal arrangement with the IMF.

13. (C) Buhari and Hamma reacted negatively to the prospect of another round of IMF negotiations. Hamma called the IMF's structural adjustment programs a "policy of impoverishment." He remarked that the IMF based its advice on numbers cooked up in Washington and New York. He said the IMF should devise their programs for economic revitalization using case specific information and keeping in mind a particular country's political and socio-economic context. Buhari interjected that, during his term as military Head of State, he neither followed IMF recommendations to devalue the Naira nor attempted to liberalize the economy. Ambassador Jeter told Buhari that before granting any sort of relief, creditor states would require credible reform, and the IMF's stamp of approval would lend credibility. Finally, Ambassador said debt relief would only be possible if the GON demonstrated that the money saved would lead to poverty reduction among the rural and urban poor.

WARY OF PRIVATIZATION

14. (C) Buhari expressed misgivings about privatization. He was uncomfortable with the privatization of some state-owned enterprises. In all cases there was a need for competent regulatory agencies to prevent the "drive for profit from wrecking the economy", and further impoverishing the people. Buhari felt that, in the end, good regulation would attract more capital than premature privatization.

GON FINANCIAL WOES WILL LIMIT BUT NOT END FOREIGN
DEPLOYMENTS

15. (C) Turning to foreign policy, Ambassador Jeter characterized Nigeria as the "indispensable player in West African security" and expressed worry over the fate of an ECOWAS force in Cote d'Ivoire that did not have Nigerian military support. Buhari asked that the USG "understand the reality of the Nigerian economy." Calling Nigeria "bankrupt", Buhari said the country could not afford to expend resources on foreign ventures when there was so much work to be done at home. However, Buhari noted that when "absolutely necessary" Nigeria would act to help insure sub-regional stability.

COMMENT

16. (C) Buhari took pains to assure the Ambassador he had no intention of exploiting Nigeria's religious divide as an election issue. However, Buhari has waited a very long time to clear his name regarding the "vote Muslim" statement, which will make his explanation seem like an election ploy. Convinced he has a lock on the Northern electorate, Buhari hopes he can win by convincing Southerners that he is not a religious bigot, but a force for reform in government. However, his formulae for getting the government and the economy back on track appear out-dated and statist.

Buhari's reputation for fighting corruption is second to none in Nigeria. His antipathy for the IMF probably indicates an inability to work with that institution.

17. (C) Overall, Buhari is optimistic about his election prospects. Despite his claims to the contrary, most Southerners and Christians believe he is an instrument of the North. Many also find his staunch support for Sharia worrisome. While he did not come across as an extremist, he will be portrayed as one by his opponents in the South. His reputation as a stern disciplinarian will prove a double-edged sword, drawing support from those who feel Nigeria is drifting without purpose but pushing those who believe that Nigeria has more freedom under Obasanjo despite the incumbent's shortcomings. END COMMENT.
JETER